The Real Meaning of Lazarus and the Rich Man

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Read the accompanying **Newsletter for June 2003**

This section of Scripture has been more misunderstood by students of the Bible than many other parts of the divine revelation. There is a definite reason for it! It is the assumption that Christ is relating a story of literal occurrences, rather than an account rehearsed in parable form. The truth is, however, the narrative is a parable from beginning to end. Once this important point is understood, the meaning becomes clear and significant.

A sure and quick way to inflame the wrath of some preachers and Christian laity is to say the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man is a parable. They will not have it! The mere suggestion that the account is symbolic is enough to bring on the charge of "theological liberalism." To many people today the normal bedrock of teaching concerning Christ's judgment upon sinners rests with the literality of this story. And one must admit, it shows a judgment of severest consequences! It seems to state, in vivid and graphic detail, the condition of wicked sinners after death. They appear to be conscious, in extreme torment, engulfed in flames that will never be extinguished and that they will remain in such excruciating pain for all eternity. And true enough, if the account of Lazarus and the Rich Man is not a parable of thoroughly symbolic meaning, this would be their fate!

Such a scene is so horrendous to imagine that it is no wonder vast numbers of fearful people walk down the aisle to accept Christ after hearing a sermon on the literality of the story. It never seems to occur to such preachers that this consignment by Christ to a never-ending judgment for sins committed in this short life, makes Him to be the most unjust and unreasonable person in the universe. Simply because someone in China or the Soviet Union (to pick two atheistic countries) never had a chance to hear of Jesus Christ and His redemptive message, and confine him to a never-ending HELL is beyond belief for a merciful and loving God who sent His only begotten son to save and redeem this world (John 3:16). However, this interpretation is part of the exact scenario being preached in many churches and revivals today. And let's face it, that is precisely what ought to be taught if lazarus and the rich man is a literal narrative.

Thankfully, there cannot be the slightest doubt that the whole account is a parable from start to finish. What many people conveniently fail to realize is the proclivity of teachers, speaking in early Semitic languages like Hebrew (or even in Greek when speaking in a Semitic environment), to constantly use the symbolic or parable form of teaching to the people they taught. Christ was no exception!

> **"All these things spoke Jesus unto the multitudes IN PARABLES and without a parable spoke he not unto them. That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.'"**
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> - ***Matthew 13:34–35***

Parables are a form of storytelling in which the physical features of some well-known subjects are exemplified to relate an essential spiritual teaching. On many occasions the incidents are greatly exaggerated to heighten the teaching. One famous example is that of Christ when he said the mustard seed was the smallest of seeds (when everyone knew it was not) and it becomes the greatest of trees (which again was not literally true). See Matthew 13:32. No one in the first century would have thought that Christ was stretching the facts. Of course he was! But it was a simple form of teaching that all people were using in that time. [1]

Since we are told dogmatically that Christ was always in the habit of speaking to the people in parables (as a common mode of instruction in the Semitic world of the first century), why do people today insist on the literality of symbolic language, while people in Christ's day normally did not? Note one thing that the apostle Paul said which has to do with the fire of judgment, yet no one in ancient times (or even today) takes literally. Paul said: "**If your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing you shall heap COALS OF FIRE on his head"** (Rom.12:20, from Proverbs 25:22). This mention of the fires of judgment on a person was only intended in a figurative sense. It shows that a person's conscience would be "singed." No literal fire was meant!

And so it is with the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man! No one with common sense could possibly believe that Christ was giving literal teaching. The whole thing is figurative from start to finish, and anyone who says differently should examine the matter closer.

Let us now look at the subject carefully. In no way should a person believe that literal acts were being discussed by Christ. Practically every detail of the story has a symbolic meaning to it, and this can be shown so clearly. When a person adopts an erroneous literality to the account, the message that Christ was trying to convey is destroyed and its true symbolic meaning is tarnished!

A Parable Throughout

The first thing to notice is the fact that Lazarus ate of the crumbs that fell from the Rich Man's table. Now, are the crumbs literal or symbolic? If literal, then tell me how Lazarus would have had enough to eat? A few measly crumbs could hardly feed any grown man. Obviously, Christ meant that the man ate the scraps (intended for dogs or other animals). However, the literalists would demand real crumbs so they can get the Rich Man into a real burning hell!

Then it says that Lazarus died and was carried by the angels into the bosom of Abraham. Where was Abraham's bosom? Some people say it signifies the heavenly abode, heaven. In fact, the bosom of Abraham actually means the breast part of his body. Can they get Lazarus and ten million other redeemed Christians in that one bosom of Abraham? There would not be any room to breathe, let alone stretch ones arms. All people, however, rightly recognize that Christ is here giving a symbol. True! That is just the point that we wish to make! If one part is figurative, all can be!

We then find that Abraham is able to carry on a conversation with the Rich Man and that Lazarus could be seen with Abraham, though the text says that Abraham was "afar off." How were they able to talk with one another? If Abraham and Lazarus were in heaven (as many preachers claim today), it shows that the redeemed would still be in constant contact with the rebellious sinners in hell and that the redeemed would be seeing their tortured and agonized faces as they writhed in unrelenting pain. Indeed, they are close enough to be in conversation with them! Can you imagine the joy and happiness the saints would have while viewing the agony of all the wicked in hell for all eternity? But if this story of Christ were to be taken literally, that would be the outcome. What glory would it be to see your unredeemed father, your unconverted mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, wife or husband having to experience the rigors of an eternally burning hell without any relief ever in sight, while you bask in the sunshine and happiness of Abraham's bosom? And remember Abraham was close enough to carry on a conversation with the Rich Man. And the Rich Man was close enough to Lazarus to recognize him.

Another thing that is highly irregular of our experience is the fact that the Rich Man was able to speak at all. Would he not more likely be screaming his head off at the terrible excruciating pain that he was being subjected to? Again, if the account is literal, we find a most impossible situation in the story. Even more than that, what does the Rich Man seek from Lazarus? It is not to drag him out of the fire, but simply to take a drop of cold water and put on his tongue. Why, the Rich Man ought to know that such a thing would not relieve his pain in the slightest! How can a drop of physical water give benefit to a spirit being (as the Rich Man would be)? The water, if literal, would turn into steam before it could do any good. And why did not the man ask Abraham to bring the drop of water to his tongue to cool it? Abraham was far closer to the Rich Man, or at least it looks this way because there was no conversation with Lazarus. What was so special about Lazarus that his drop of water would cool his tongue, but Abraham was not asked for any help?

The point is, the whole scene (though instructive and significant in what our Lord was trying to teach) is impossible to explain sensibly if Christ was teaching fact. However, make it a parable (as it truly is, remembering that Christ would not teach without a parable), then the message becomes beautiful and understandable. Again, everyone knows Paul did not mean literal "coals of fire on one's head" in Romans 12:20.

The True Story in Detail

The story of Lazarus and the Rich Man is a parable (Matthew 13:34). Once this is recognized the interpretation behind the narrative can become quite meaningful. It is also very important to note the context in which the parable is found. There was a reason why Christ spoke this parable at that time. Christ had just given His teaching about the unjust steward who had mishandled his master's money (Luke 16:1–13). This parable was told to further illustrate what proper stewardship is.

Let us first consider the identification of Lazarus. This is the only time in Christ's parables that a person's name is used. Some have imagined that this use of a personal name precludes the story being a parable. But this is hardly true. The name "Lazarus" is a transliteration of the Hebrew "Eleazar" (which means "God has helped"). The name was a common Hebrew word used for eleven different persons in the Old Testament.

When one analyzes the parable, this Eleazar can be identified. He was one who must have had some kind of affinity with Abraham (or the Abrahamic covenant), for the parable places him in Abraham's bosom after death. But he was probably a Gentile. The phrase **"desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table"** was typical of Gentile identification (see Matthew 15:22–28). Even the phrase "laid at his gate" is reminiscent of the normal one used by Jews to denote the Gentile proselyte "Proselyte of the Gate." This Eleazar must also have been associated with stewardship because Christ gave the parable precisely for the reason of explaining what represents the true steward.

There was only one Eleazar in the historical part of the Bible that fits the description. He was a person associated with Abraham, he was a Gentile (not an ethnic part of the Abrahamic family), and a steward. He was Eleazar of Damascus, the chief steward of Abraham.

> **"And Abram said, 'Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eleazar** [Lazarus] **of Damascus and lo, one born in my house is mine heir.'"**
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> - ***Genesis 15:2–3***

Long ago it was suggested that the Lazarus of the parable represented the Eleazar associated with Abraham (Geiger, *JuJ Zejtschr.*, 1868, p. 196 sq.), but for some reason very few modern commentators have taken up the identification. But once this simple connection is made, a flood of light emerges on the scene which can interpret the parable with real meaning.

The Lazarus of the parable represented Abraham's faithful steward Eleazar. And faithful he was! Though he had been the legal heir to receive all of Abraham's possessions (Genesis 15:3), Abraham gave him an assignment which was to result in his own disinheritance. But the Bible shows he carried out the orders of Abraham in a precise (and faithful) way.

> **"And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house** [Eleazar]**, that ruled over all that he had, 'Put, I pray thee, your hand under my thigh: and I will make thee swear by the Lord, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that you shall not take a wife unto my son** [Isaac] **of the daughters of the Canaanites.'"**
>
> - ***Genesis 24:2–3***

Eleazar agreed to do what Abraham desired, although the fulfillment of his task meant the complete abandonment of Eleazar's claim to any of Abraham's inheritance—both present and future! Each step that Eleazar took northward to procure a wife for Isaac was a step towards his own disqualification. Eleazar recognized this, for he admitted to Laban, Rebecca's brother, that **"unto him** [Isaac] **hath he** [Abraham] **given all**

that he hath"(Genesis 24:36). There was nothing left for him! Thus, Eleazar's faithfulness to Abraham resulted in his own disinheritance from all the promises of blessing which God had given to Abraham. They were now given to Isaac and his future family. That inheritance included wealth, prestige, power, kingship, priesthood, and the land of Canaan as an "everlasting" possession. But now Eleazar was "cast out." He and his seed would inherit nothing. Thus, the parable calls Lazarus a "beggar" who possessed nothing of earthly worth.

Who Was the Rich Man?

The Rich Man was an actual son of Abraham. Christ had him calling Abraham his "father" (Luke 16:24) and Abraham acknowledged him as "son" (verse 25). Such sonship made the Rich Man a legal possessor of Abraham's inheritance. Indeed, the Rich Man had all the physical blessings promised to Abraham's seed. He wore purple, the symbol of kingship, a sign that the Davidic or Messianic Kingdom was his. He wore linen, the symbol of priesthood, showing that God's ordained priests and the Temple were his. Who was this Rich Man who possessed these blessings while living on the earth?

The Israelite tribe that finally assumed possession of both the kingdom and priesthood, and the tribe which became the representative one of all the promises given to Abraham, was Judah. There can not be the slightest doubt of this when the whole parable is analyzed. Remember that Judah had "five brothers." The Rich Man also had the same (verse 28).

> **"The sons of Leah;** [1] **Reuben; Jacob's firstborn, and** [2] **Simeon, and** [3]**Levi, and Judah, and** [4] **Issachar, and** [5] **Zebulun."**
>
> - ***Genesis 35:23***

> **"And Leah said ... 'now will my husband be pleased to dwell with me; for I have born him six sons.'"**
>
> - ***Genesis 30:20***

Judah and the Rich Man each had "five brethren." Not only that, the five brothers of the parable had in their midst "Moses and the prophets" (verse 29). The people of Judah possessed the "oracles of God" (Romans 3:1–2). Though the Rich Man (Judah) had been given the actual inheritance of Abraham's blessings (both spiritual and physical), Christ was showing that he had been unfaithful with his responsibilities. When the true inheritance was to be given, Judah was in "hades" and "in torment" while Lazarus (Eleazar, the faithful steward) was now in Abraham's bosom. He was finally received into the "everlasting habitations" (verse 9).

"A Great Gulf Fixed"

The parable says that a **"great gulf"** [Greek: *chasm*] was fixed between the position of Abraham and Eleazar and that of the Rich Man [Judah]. What was this chasm? The Greek word means a deep ravine or valley — a great canyon with cliffs on each side. Its two sides were also **"afar off"** from each other (verse 23). It was **"a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence"** (verse 26). Note the italicized word **"pass."** In all other occasions of its grammatical use in the New Testament, the word was used to denote a passage over water. And in Greek imagery of the abodes of the dead, there was usually some kind of water barrier between the righteous dead and the wicked — either a river or ocean. This is also represented in Jewish conceptions of the compartments for the dead — **"by a chasm, by water, and by light above it"** (Enoch, ch. 22).

It was also common for many chasms (those described in Greek literature) to have water in their regions of deepest declivity. Let us now look at such a chasm from a Palestinian point of view. In that environment there is only one possible identification for the "great gulf" of the parable if it is to fit the meaning of the Greek chasm precisely. This would be the great rift valley between the highlands of Trans-Jordan and the hill country of Ephraim in which the River Jordan flows. This fault line is the greatest and longest visible chasm on earth. And what a

spectacular sight it is! As one looks over the chasm he sees impressive cliffs on each side, a desert in its wastelands, and the River Jordan meandering in the center.

Identifying the chasm of the parable with the Jordan rift unfolds a beautiful symbolic story well recognized in contemporary Jewish allegorical narratives of the time. In the center of this "gulf" was the River Jordan. It divided the original land of promise given to Abraham from ordinary Gentile lands. The west side of Jordan represented the area that the Bible considered the original Holy Land. As the angel said to Joshua: **"Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon stand is holy. And Joshua did so"** (Joshua 5:15). When the Israelites finally entered the chasm of the Jordan and crossed the river, they then considered themselves in the Holy Land the land promised to Abraham and his seed!

Entering the land of Canaan (west of Jordan) was also a symbol of final spiritual salvation. The author of Hebrews recognized that Israel's crossing of the River Jordan under Joshua (and the taking of the land of Canaan) was typical of Christians obtaining their true "rest" in the future Kingdom of God (Hebrews 3:1–4:11). Even American Negro spirituals with which so many of us are familiar ("crossing into Canaan's land") are reflective of this early symbolic theme.

Recall also that the Rich Man was depicted as being in flames of judgment (verse 24). In this same rift valley were formerly located the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah which were "set forth for an example suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 7).

> **"Turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample unto those who should after live ungodly."**
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> • ***2 Peter 2:6***

When the allegorical applications are understood, the teaching of the parable becomes simple and instructive. The theme of Christ's narrative was true stewardship. Though Eleazar [Lazarus], Abraham's trusted steward, had disinherited himself from earthly rewards by his faithful obedience to Abraham's wishes, he was later to find himself (after death, when true inheritance comes) in Abraham's bosom. But the chief representative of Abraham's actual sons (Judah, the spiritual leader of all the Israelite tribes) remained East of Canaan as far as true inheritance was concerned. He had inherited all the physical blessings while in the flesh, but at death he was not allowed to pass the spiritual Jordan into the final Abrahamic inheritance.

Like Moses, because of rebellion, he was not allowed to pass the **"great gulf"** to enjoy the land of milk and honey. True enough, Judah had been blessed with the kingship, priesthood, the divine scriptures, the prophets, and other untold blessings, but he was not allowed to enjoy the true spiritual blessings of the future because he was unfaithful with his sonship and was refusing the true message of salvation offered by God's own Son. Christ said:**"Neither will they he persuaded, though one rose from the dead"** (Luke 16:31).

The Final Appraisal

The only Gospel to carry the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man was Luke who was the companion of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. It showed a specific message that Gentiles could now inherit the promises to Abraham provided they were faithful as Eleazar had been. Yet Paul did not want the Gentiles to be conceited in their new relationship with God.

> **"What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeks for ... God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, ears that they should not hear; unto this day."**
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> • ***Romans 11:8***

But **"Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid"** (verse 11). **"Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles** [like Lazarus-Eleazar]**; how much more their fullness"** (verse 12). One of these days,

according to Paul, **"all Israel shall be saved"** (verse 26). God will show mercy on the natural sons of Abraham as He has on faithful Gentile stewards. This shows that the hades, the purple, the linen, the torment, Abraham's bosom, the great gulf, and even the persons of Lazarus and the Rich Man were all symbolic and not literal. After all, the narrative was a parable.

Summary of the Symbols

1. The Lazarus of the parable was Eleazar, Abraham's steward (Genesis 15:2).
2. He was a Gentile **"of Damascus"** (**"a proselyte of the gate"**) who **"ate the crumbs."**
3. He was disinherited (to become a beggar) but he remained faithful to Abraham and God.
4. When this earthly life was over, he received Abraham's inheritance after all (he was in Abraham's bosom) — in **"everlasting habitations."**
5. The Rich Man of the Parable was Judah. This son of Jacob had five literal brothers as did the Rich Man.
6. He was also a literal son of Abraham, while Eleazar (Lazarus) was not!
7. The Rich Man (Judah) also had the kingship (purple) and the priesthood (linen).
8. Yet Judah (representing God on this earth) was not the true steward of the Abrahamic blessings.
9. Though he and his literal brothers had been graced with the "oracles of God" (the Old Testament) they would not respond to the One resurrected from the dead (Christ).
10. The **"great gulf"** was the Jordan rift valley the dividing line between Gentile lands and the Holy Land of promise (Abraham's inheritance). Crossing the Jordan was a typical figure recognized by the Jews as a symbol of salvation.

Once these factors are recognized, all the points in the parable (with its context) fit perfectly to give us some simple but profound teachings of Christ. It shows that the physical promises of God (though excellent) are very inferior to the spiritual redemption that anyone (Jew or Gentile) can have in Christ.

Concluding Remarks about Hell

What are the consequences of sin? We are told by many people who view the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man literally, plus some scriptures in the book of Revelation, that it means to be in hell fire for all eternity. Let us also understand the book of Revelation is very symbolic! Though it speaks of the rebellious being tormented with fire and brimstone for ever and ever (for the ages of the ages), it is also the same book that speaks of Jesus Christ, equally in symbolic form, of looking like a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes in his face (Revelation 6:6 with 14:10–11). This section is, of course, symbolic as anyone can see.

This does not mean that figurative teaching has an unpractical meaning. Far from it! What must be discovered is the *real* teaching. Take, for example, the punishments God gives for sins. There are hundreds of scriptures that show God's retribution upon individuals and the world for their rebellion to Him and their harm to mankind. But the punishments of judgment are not to burn literally in a hell fire forever! Indeed, judgment is now on the house of God.

"For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God; and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?"

- ***1 Peter 4:17***

No sinning saint is now in the fires of judgment. All people sin — alas, even Christians from time to time (1 John 1:8), but all are promised eternal life — yet they suffer the loss of certain wonderful rewards for the millennial period if they persist in sin,

"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ... Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he has built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire."

- ***1 Corinthians 3:11–15***

The Bible says it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of God when people rebel against Him (Hebrews 10:31), even though Christian people are sanctified and their salvation is secure in Christ (Hebrews 10:14).

When the whole of the Bible is studied on the matter, it is seen that the judgment of hell after death is symbolic. People who have had some "near death" experiences and thought they were going to a burning hell, were having hallucinations inspired by their imaginations. [2]After all, people who have been taught all their lives about a literal hell fire to be experienced for all eternity, have difficulty in eradicating such things from their minds at the point of death — and this is more so if they think they are dying as sinners. However, Christ came to save the world, and He will do it!

The geographical area that was a symbol of fiery judgment was the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna) at the southeast corner of Jerusalem. It was the city dump. Normally, fires were set in the region to burn up the refuse. If dead bodies were placed there in time of war (or sometimes in pagan rituals), worms would emerge to destroy the carcasses. This is what Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:44–48 are talking about. Of course, the fires were in a separate area from the worms because worms cannot live in flames.

The whole thing was intended to be figurative in the first place. Gehenna (hell) was known as Tophet (Isaiah 30:33 with Jeremiah 7:31) and remarkably the entire area will one day become *holy* to the Lord (Jeremiah 31:38–40). There will certainly not be any eternal fires in Gehenna. (The "unquenchable fires" of Matthew 3:12 are fires that cannot be put out with water or soil *until* they have consumed all the combustible material.)

The truth is, it can be shown conclusively that the consequences of doing sin are *NOT* to be placed in a hell fire forever and ever. The Bible makes the issue plain for all to see if only people will believe its simple teaching. Many do not want to do this, and they insist on making literal what the Scripture allows only to be symbolic.

Look at this closely. It is simple and plain. All Christians know that the Bible emphatically states that Jesus paid for all our sins (even the sins of the world) when He died on the cross. If anyone disputes this fact, then the very essence of the theological teaching of the New Testament is thwarted.

"And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

- ***1 John 2:2***

This is abundantly true! But now note this! If the consequences of sin were to be placed in a hell fire to be burned forever, *then for Christ to have paid the penalty of our sins* (so we do not have to suffer it), *then Christ would have to be in that hell fire forever* — always suffering the

consequences of our sins. After all, the Bible says that Christ took our punishment. But Christ was alive from the dead some three days later, and is presently in heaven with the Father. He is not in an eternal hell fire undergoing the consequences of our sins! All of the scriptures speaking about the punishment of fire are symbolic. If they are not, then they would violate this fundamental theological fact of the New Testament that Christ paid the punishment for our sins without being burnt in any flames.

Indeed, what did Christ do for us? The Bible says "He died" (Romans 3:34). And what are the wages of sin? — the consequences of sin?

"For the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

- ***Romans 6:23***

The result of sin is death — not life in hell fire or anywhere else! What Jesus did was to be crucified for us on the cross. He did not go into hell fire to burn forever — or else He would still be there!

One other point needs to be made. Some denominations say that the wages of sin are eternal death (nonexistence). But this cannot be true. If it were, then Christ (in order to pay the penalty for our sins) would have had to remain dead for all eternity! Yet He was dead for only three days! He is now with the Father in heaven and getting ready to return to this earth to redeem His saints at the resurrection of the just. Others have said that since all humans have to die the first (physical) death (Hebrews 9:27), it is the *second* death that Christ died for us. But how can that be? The *second* death is the Lake of Fire in the Book of Revelation (Revelation 20:14), and it is obvious that Christ did not go into any literal Lake of Fire while He died on the cross. His death was *for us*!

What Christ did do for you, me and all mankind was to make it possible for all death to be abolished (1 Corinthians 15:26) which He will accomplish in His own good time. Only *"life"* will then exist!

The fact is, the Bible makes perfectly good sense on the matter of the punishments for sin. It is when well-intentioned, but erroneous, interpreters begin to make symbolic scriptures to be literal, that all of the problems emerge. All becomes confusing and contradictory when this type of procedure is used. The story of Lazarus and the Rich Man is a pure parable from beginning to end. It makes perfectly good sense and tells a wonderful and significant story that any student of the Bible can relate to. Let us learn to leave the parables *as parables*! The Bible will become plain if we do.

"All these things spoke Jesus unto the multitudes *in parables*; and without a parable spoke he not unto them."

- ***Matthew 13:34***

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